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ABSTRACT

The professional development process can be organized as a continuous, multifaceted, proactive, and integrated system that is futures-oriented and focused on adaptation as an essential organizational function. A systems model employing a university professional school as an example is presented. It focuses on professional schools because they lend themselves more easily to an understanding of systems. In a systems approach professional development is seen in the context of the other organizations of which the institution is a subsystem. Change in one function is seen to have an impact on all other systems. The functional processes of systems are adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern management. In this presentation the concentration is on adaptation and integration. For a university professional school to adapt, it must interface with health and human service agencies and the schools and school districts with which it is linked. All parts of the system must be aware of the political, cultural, economic, and social variables in the system's external environment. Professional development is the mechanism used by systems to adapt input for decision processes. The systems perspective shows that the professional school is not engaged in professional development by itself, but is shaped by (and shapes) the larger systems. Included are three model figures and a brief reference list. (MD)

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A FUTURES-ORIENTED SYSTEMS MODEL OF
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
IN COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS

Ninth Annual Conference of Educators and Scholars

D'Youville College

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Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

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INTRODUCTION

Professional development is an important organizational process because it allows organizations to strengthen their capabilities and enhance their member contributions and -- thus -- to successfully adapt to change. The process is even more critically important in that class of complex organizations which are made-up in large part of professional members (for example, museums, hospitals, schools and agencies, and colleges and universities) because "organizational outputs can be increased by improving the quality of inputs (Beer and Huse, 1972), "the management experts tell us.

For the most part, complex organizations have addressed professional development structurally by focusing on "the role responsibilities and relationships of organizational members (Alshuler, 1979)," with a process that has tended to be conceptualized in discrete, reactive, and exclusive terms.

The process is characterized as discrete because professional development has usually been no more than a series of disjointed experiences in most organizations. In fact, organizational professional development activity has tended to be irregularly scheduled, not closely related to other organizational processes, and particularly susceptible to budget cuts. Further, professional development is seen as reactive because activities generally seem to be undertaken in response to specific stimuli rather than in anticipation of or to precipitate changes in the organization or its external environment. Finally, the process is viewed as exclusive insofar as it is carried on without regard for the developmental needs of personnel in other parts of the same organization or in other, complementary organizations. For example, a social agency may approach the professional development function by modifying existing roles in response to perceived problems. It is unlikely, however, that this activity will be carried on with formal input from the agency's clients or so structured as to insure feedback into the system from the network of interdependent organizations with which the agency regularly interacts.

Because the process is discrete, reactive and exclusive, organizational professional development confounds planning processes and -- all too frequently -- contributes to low morale instead of ameliorating it. And, in the final analysis, although organizations may change as a result of this sort of professional development activity, they are unlikely to make the necessary adaptations to change which alone insure success. Given the "graying" of faculties in schools and colleges, for example, can we afford anything less than successful adaptation? We must maximize the quality of our inputs, because we cannot change them.

In contrast, it is possible for the professional development process to be organized as a continuous, multi faceted, pro-active and integrated system that is both futures-oriented and focused on adaptation as an essential organizational function.

For purposes of specificity, I offer the following systems model which employs a university professional school as an example. An academic example is used because universities -- an identifiable subset of complex organizations -- are analytically analagous to other organizations which are also comprised to a high-degree of nearly-autonomous professional members; and the analogy is sought so that the benefits of the model may be generalized to these other professional organizations.

In addition, I have elected to focus on a university professional school because these schools are clearly parts of larger systems, performing an integrative function insofar as they bridge the gap between professional education and the professions themselves. As such, professional schools (for example, my own college of education and human services) lend themselves most easily to an understanding of systems as a more inclusive concept than previously considered to be the case in discussions of the professional development process.

Professional development addressed only in structural terms ignores the needs and concerns of professionals in those other organizations who are at once the products and the consumers of the university's products. In a systems approach, however, these other organizations cannot be overlooked. A university's professional school is de facto a subsystem

within the larger context of the educating and helping professions. Change in one aspect of the system, therefore, "requires that mutually consistent changes in all subsystems be made (Beer and Huse, 1979)." Change in the professional development function of a school impacts on the professional development of faculty in a department of education.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SYSTEMS

What exactly is a system? The concept of systems was borrowed from biology by behavioral scientists and is used here to refer to a university organization as "an open system which, from a human point of view, converts individual needs and expectations into outputs (Beer and Huse, 1979)."

The functional processes common to all systems -- identified and described by Parsons and Bales (1953) in their A-G-I-L classification -- are: Adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern management. Specifically, "adaptation describes the process through which change takes place among the parts of a social system and between the system and its environment. ...Goal attainment describes those activities which allow for organizational coordination to meet specific needs through the mobilization of systemic resources. ...Integration describes the processes used to adjust relations among a system's constituent parts. ...(a)nd latent pattern management involves the continuation of the system's basic values (Clevenger, 1983)." All these functions are important for an understanding of systems but for purposes of brevity : concentrate in this presentation on the functions of adaptation and integration as central to a systems*orientation to professional development.

In addition, I call attention to the following systems properties identified by Beer and Huse (1979) in their work on organizational development. They bear directly on the model I am about to present:

1. An organization is an open system which converts individual needs and expectations into outputs.
2. Organizational performance can be improved by unleashing more of the potential inherent in human resources.
3. Professional development models must reflect the complex interactive nature of systems variables.

THE PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL AS A SUBSYSTEM

No system exists by itself and all systems are susceptible to influences from their environment. Further, although organizations are commonly referred to as systems in presentations such as these, some organizations may be more accurately referred to as subsystems. This is especially the case when the organization must interface extensively with other organizations (or subsystems) in order to function effectively as a system. This, I contend, is the case with the university's professional school. In order for the school to perform essential systems functions -- to adapt, to attain its goals, to adjust relations among its consitutencies, and to maintain its value structure -- it must interface extensively with the

health and human service agencies and the schools and school districts with which it is inextricably linked*.

(See Figure 1.)

Moreover, all parts of the social system thus formed must be cognizant of the political, cultural, economic and social variables that make up the system's external environment because these variables are sources of influence on the system and its parts.

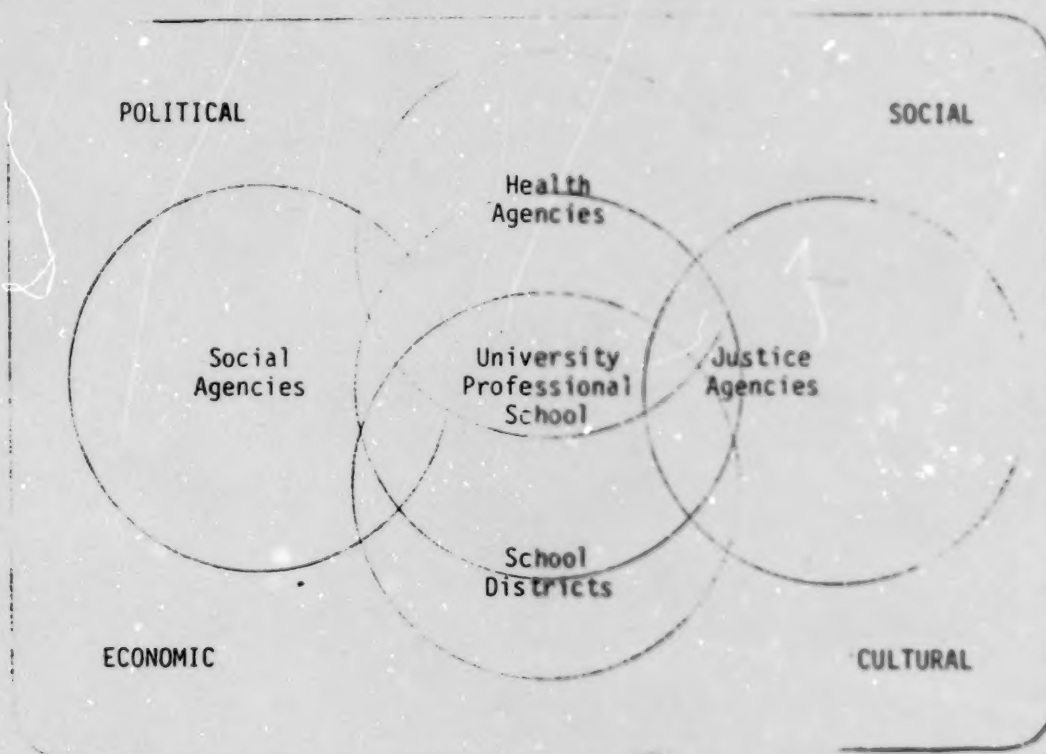
In systems jargon, these influences are "inputs," demands and supports, without which "the system can do no work and cannot sustain itself (Conway and Feigert, 1972)." For example, in the case of the university professional school, supports are the things needed to sustain the school physically: money, students and faculty. Demands, on the other hand, are those less tangible things that "lend purpose and direction (ibid)" to a system as the system sorts out competing requests for its "product."

Although these demands differ in kind, source, intensity and number, all demands place stress on a system. Why? Because the processes of social systems are not mechanistic when they deal with the allocation of scarce resources. Because there is not enough "product" to go around, decisions have to be made. These decisions are called the system's output.

*The professional school may also be considered a subsystem of the university system. In this context, a different set of demands and supports must be considered complicating the tasks of the unwary.

Figure 1.

The University Professional School as a Subsystem
of an Interactive System of Educating and Helping Professions



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(See Figure 2.)

The system loop is complete when the output prompts feedback (information, calls for correction, learning) which filters back through the system's environment and re-enters the system in the form of new supports and demands.

MEANWHILE, BACK AT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What has all this to do with professional development in a university college? Professional development is the mechanism used by systems in adapting to stimuli in their environments, stimuli which we now know as input for our decision processes (the instrumentality through which demands and supports are converted to outputs).

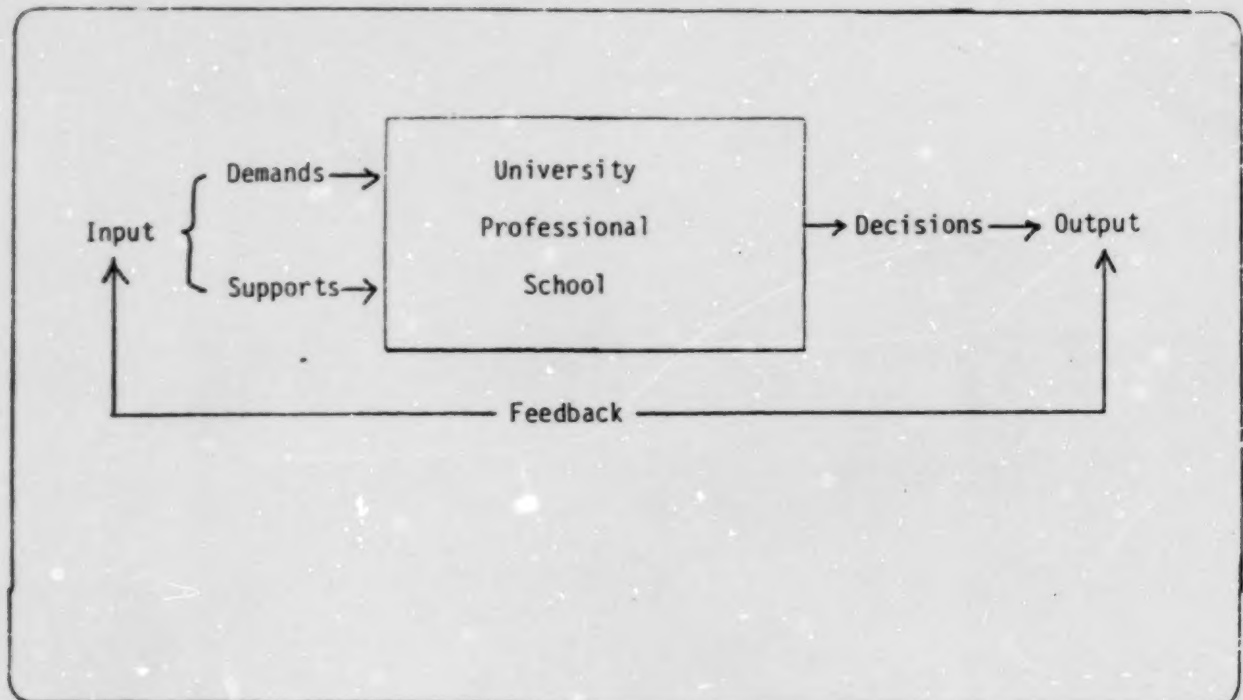
Moreover, the systems perspective allows us to see that the professional school is not engaged in professional development activity by itself. Rather, as part of a network of other subsystems, its professional development is shaped by and -- in turn -- shapes the larger system's conversion processes through extensive interfacing and good feedback.

(See Figure 3.)

In the example, (1) state-mandated changes in graduation requirements prompt (2) a need/demand for inservice education in the school district; (3) the need/demand is communicated to the professional school prompting

Figure 2.

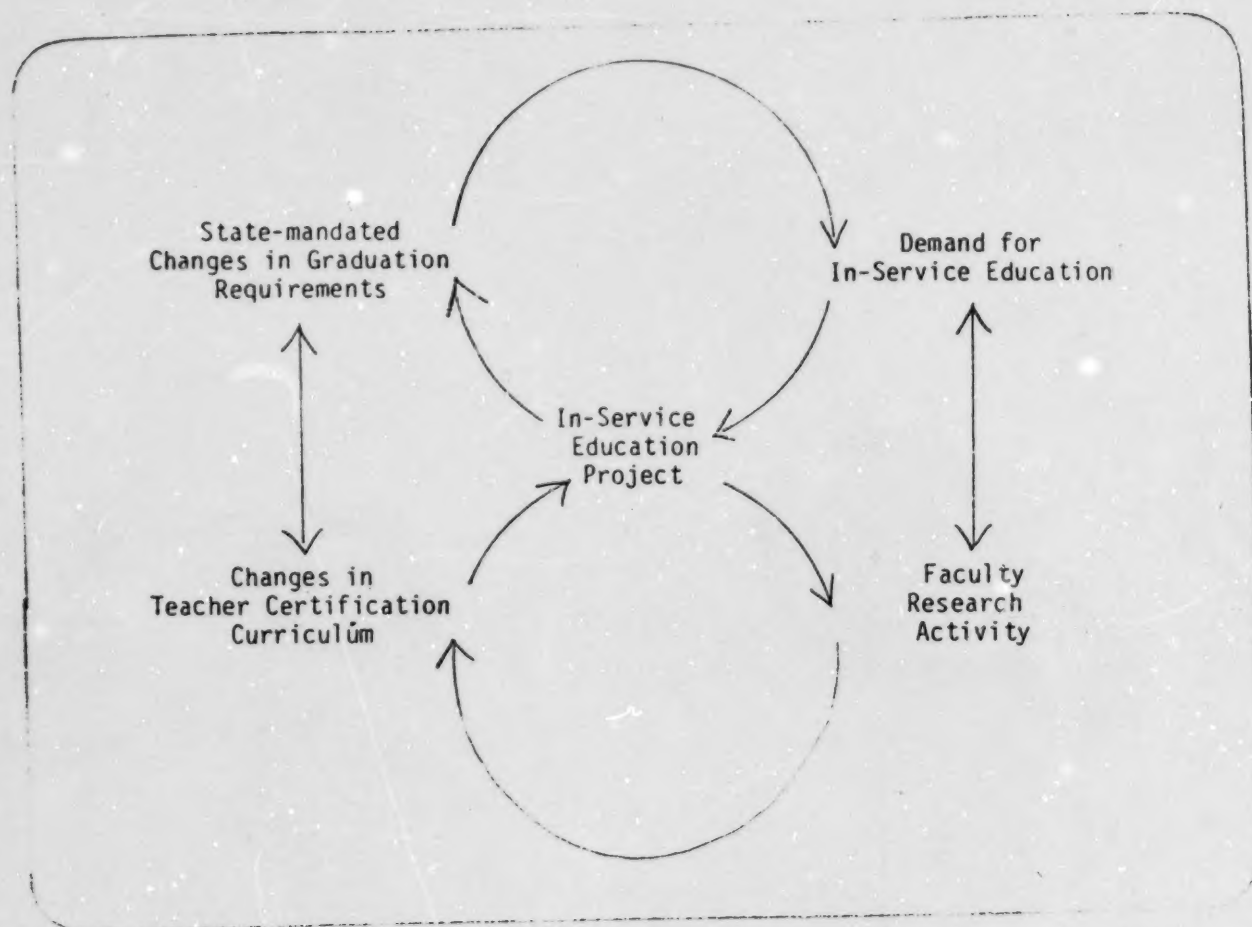
Basic Eastonian Model
for the Analysis of Social Systems



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Figure 3.

Professional Schools and School Districts:
An Interactive Example



faculty research activity that results in both (4) the design of an inservice education project; and (5) changes in the institution's pre-service curriculum. The efficiency of the model is high because it results in:

1. Professional development activities in both subsystems (adaptation)
2. Accomplishment of the objective through the mobilization of system resources (goal attainment)
3. Institutionalization of the change through adjustment of the pre-service program (latent pattern management)

The reason for the effectiveness, again, is that the model incorporates a capability for the extensive interfacing of the sub-systems and the setting of a positive (proactive) climate for the ongoing (continuous) sharing of multi-faceted ideas/learning through the system. In short, regularizing intrasystem communications (that is, improving the feedback process) is key to the success of an integrated professional development model.

SOME FINAL OBSERVATIONS

There is much to be learned from the study of systems, and of organizational development in systems. The following summary observations are based on the findings of Beer and Huse (ibid) and their "input-process-output" model of a commercial organization.

1. A commitment on the part of top leadership is not always necessary. Professional development can and does begin at lower levels in an organization.

We ignore the professionalism of our colleagues at our own risk.

All too often the professional development process is so bureaucratized that it becomes per se an obstacle to the "unfreezing" of member capabilities.

2. Effective change (that is adaptation) comes only after an individual has experimented with new approaches, adjusted based on appropriate feedback, and institutionalized the change within the system by becoming an opinion leader who helps shape the culture that influences others to begin new experiments.

A system output, in this case, is higher productivity, greater commitment to shared values, and higher motivation resulting from increased satisfaction.

3. Multiple changes in the subsystem are needed if the individual member is going to be expected to change her perceptions of her role, and her behavior. Flexibility fosters innovation. These changes, in turn, set off additional interactive processes and tend to increase outputs by developing the latent abilities of people.
4. Subsystems eventually become sophisticated consumers of each others outputs, overcoming earlier resistance to interaction.

Nothing contributes more to us as members of institutions -- schools, agencies, colleges and universities - than the distinction of our colleagues. Their performance improves our image and allows us to maintain and increase the support of our publics. Professional development allows our colleagues in professional schools to distinguish themselves.

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